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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINS](#) [PINR](#) [KDEM](#) [NI](#)

SUBJECT: NIGERIA 2003: OO BOOSTERS TRY TO PRE-EMPT
COMPETITION

REF: A. ABUJA 1068

[B](#). ABUJA 829

[C](#). ABUJA 1091

[D](#). ABUJA 1159

Classified by CDA Andrews. Reason: 1.5(b).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: From the perspective of recent history, the processions of sycophantic visitors and Obasanjo's own words strongly suggest Nigeria's President will seek a second term. At a minimum, Obasanjo boosters seek to pre-empt anyone else contemplating a run -- the better to assure continued access to the public trough where they greedily feed. The political show of force intends to impress upon potential opponents and their possible allies the costs of confronting the incumbent. But despite an increasing tendency toward isolating himself, Obasanjo knows his Administration has not delivered much to the average Nigerian and that sycophancy does not demonstrate popularity. There is still a small chance he'll say, "No." End Summary.

WHATEVER SUITS YOUR SYCOPHANCY

[1](#)2. (SBU) The orchestrated visit to President Obasanjo's Ota Farm the Tuesday after Easter (ref A) by 20 governors and a score or so of other political figures continues to generate controversy. Political cartoons show the same archetypal political elites who pleaded with Abacha to run in 1998 now imploring Obasanjo to seek a second term. "ThisDay" ginned up a merged photo (half Abacha/half Obasanjo) to accompany a column on the similarities between Abacha's self-succession plans and the growing Obasanjo-is-indispensable movement.

[1](#)3. (U) While those angered by the event have dubbed it an "unholy pilgrimage by sycophants" who were acting out a "Sani Abacha script," Obasanjo's supporters are asking questions, a notable one being: if the Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF) is free to campaign openly against Obasanjo running for a second term, why should his supporters not step out to openly and resolutely prevail on him to run?

[1](#)4. (C) What apparently galls many Nigerians is that both Obasanjo and his supporters are trying to show the world that it is not he that wants to continue as the President, rather that Nigerians who have anointed him as a political Messiah. The 14-day fast (Ref A) that ends today and OO's frequent references to a need for divine guidance inject a spiritual element intended to resonate with Nigeria's deeply religious masses but which deepens the cynicism of commentators, who note that Abacha did much the same thing in 1998. Obasanjo's boosters are not talking about his achievements as a basis for seeking reelection. They are, in effect, saying that there is no alternative to Obasanjo -- a sycophantic, unimaginative card that makes the Presidency look rather cheap. Perennial Information Minister Jerry Gana disingenuously claimed that the April 2 event did not amount to clearing the way for Obasanjo to emerge as the sole candidate and that the presidential race was still open, even in the President's party, the People's Democratic Party (PDP).

[1](#)5. (C) However, sources tell us, Works and Housing Minister Tony Anenih made it clear that governors who declined to join the parade at Ota should expect the Obasanjo Administration to deploy its powers against them. For Abubakar Audu of Kogi, facing scrutiny over residential real estate purchases in London and Potomac, being from the opposition All Peoples Party was not enough to keep him away from Ota. Writing in "ThisDay", Olusegun Adeniyi commented, "What...bothers me is the total lack of creativity that Obasanjo's undertakers have shown in recent weeks. Must they do it the Abacha way? This lack of creativity may also tellingly reveal to us why these

public office holders have not been able to achieve anything tangible in three years. They have no fresh ideas, even for manipulating people and elections." Separately, an Obasanjo confidant told us that someone might be paid to run against the President in order to preserve the appearance of an open race. If attempted, it would not be a new concept; Ibrahim Babangida reportedly provided money to both Moshood Abiola and Bashir Tofa to finance their 1993 presidential campaigns.

-----AN HISTORICAL COUNTERPOINT

16. (U) In 1956, Western Region premier Chief Obafemi Awolowo faced some of the re-election challenges that confront Chief Olusegun Obasanjo today. According to Akpo Esajere of the "Guardian", Awo did not tell people to go and pray or that he was seeking divine guidance to know if he should re-contest. Instead, the sage quietly mobilized his lieutenants. When he stepped into the open, he enumerated what he had achieved and what more he would do. The campaign not only highlighted his achievements, it sought to knock the bottom out of the case of his opponents, in that it carefully detailed how he would move the region forward from the point to which he had taken it. It was a confident campaign whose persuasive edges would seem more useful to Obasanjo than allowing professional politicians to come and beg him to run for another term.

TRIED AND TRUE

17. (U) The events of April 2 serve to remind observers not only of parallels with Abacha in 1998, but also of OO's actions prior to deciding to run in 1999. In 1998 after his release from prison, Obasanjo claimed to have no desire to run for President, and it was rumored that this refusal to contest was part of the bargain that granted his release. But within weeks, he had received several leading Southwest politicians, including the current Internal Affairs Minister, Chief Sunday Afolabi, who begged him to seek the Presidency. Obasanjo was reported as having said that if Nigerians wanted him to become President, he was left with no choice but to seek divine direction.

18. (C) The President is now using pretty much the same tactic, except that perhaps that "begging" him to come and run is this time being done on a large scale, the idea being that the "Messiah" air should be brought home as forcefully as his campaign machinery can make possible, in hopes, perhaps, of intimidating all possible opposition with this manifestation of the power of incumbency. Visits to Aso Villa or Ota to "persuade" Obasanjo are part of a larger strategy. Different "independent" campaign groups have been created, notably Coalition 2003, Obasanjo Solidarity Forum, Vote Obasanjo/Atiku (VOA), Leadership Front, Alliance for Obasanjo and Atiku and others. The PDP women's forum, led by Josephine Anenih, wife of Tony Anenih went to Aso Rock to plead with the President. Earlier, the women's arm of the Obasanjo Solidarity Forum was also admitted into the Villa to plead.

19. (C) Aside from the Ota event, Anenih had been active in efforts to make the President's re-election a fait accompli. He recently led a delegation comprising the governors of Rivers, Cross River and Bayelsa states, as well as some top party chiefs from the South-South zone, to Aso Rock. The path was well-trod; Anenih had been prominent among those political figures who in 1998 averred that Nigeria could not survive without Abacha. Not to be left out, Chief Solomon Lar in late March led PDP figures from the North-Central zone to Aso Villa to plead with Obasanjo to re-contest. Lar was Police Affairs Minister under Abacha until a falling-out sent him home to Langtang; he later emerged as the first chairman of the PDP.

110. (U) To all these, Obasanjo had given a standard response, except that on April 2, he notched the stakes a bit higher. His words -- "I have been touched to the point of emotion, to the point of sentimentality. When you have this type of gathering uninstigated by me, unsolicited, as genuine as it is, one cannot but feel touched, because what else does one want in life except to serve humanity and serve God" -- were in character and according to script, even though they struck a discordant note with many sophisticated Nigerians, and even with some assumed to lack sophistication. Cynicism about the pleaders not only runs deep, but increasingly wide. As one Embassy driver succinctly put it, "They just want to keep eating our money."

THE PERSPECTIVE FROM "ABROAD"

11. (U) In his administration, which clocks three years in late May, Obasanjo has made 90 trips abroad. However, the benefits of the trips are unclear to many Nigerians. Despite all the travel, Obasanjo has not obtained the painless debt cancellation he so avidly seeks, nor are foreign companies (other than South Africans) interested in investing in the non-oil sector. Recently, Investors International London, Limited (IIL) was unable to raise the funds needed to buy 51 percent of GON-owned Nigeria Telecommunications (NITEL) and seems likely to lose its deposit, casting a further pall over Nigeria's privatization exercise. Nigerian elites are deeply ambivalent about privatization, anyway. They complain about foreigners buying the "national patrimony" for less than its "true" value (there is particular unhappiness with the South Africans) but are just as bitter that privatization has produced little net inflow of foreign direct investment.

12. (U) Nigerian elites are equally confused about the roles being played by some of Nigeria's key international partners. Noting that "Western countries especially America and Britain are said to be unsatisfied with the Obasanjo administration's performance in fighting corruption, battling the scepter (sic) of insecurity and stabilizing the polity and the economy," Esajere sees the hands of Washington and London trying to guide Obasanjo to eschew a second term: "About nine months ago, when Obasanjo's administration was a little over two years, a campaign suddenly came out that the President should play Nelson Mandela or take to the path of the biblical John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus Christ. Foreign diplomats are said to be behind the campaign, which has put enormous pressures on Obasanjo."

13. (U) Satisfied with his own analysis, Esajere concludes that Obasanjo should have "actively created a successor who (could) stabilize the polity. But Obasanjo is not one to willingly and selflessly give his blessing to a young man as Mandela did with President Thabo Mbeki in South Africa. Can Obasanjo play John the Baptist, talking about 'one among you?' He is most unlikely to do that," Esajere concludes.

14. (C) While we do not share Esajere's conviction that the US and the UK actively seek to have Obasanjo remove himself from the 2003 campaign, we agree with the view that Nigeria's President is temperamentally disinclined to choose a strong successor -- if choose a successor he someday must. For now, the staged visits presume continuity rather than succession. Those who would counsel Obasanjo to retire (such as Abraham Adesanya, Sunday Awoniyi, Isyaku Ibrahim and Abdulkadir Kure) or at least to dispense with the theatrics are not invited into his presence. By all accounts and based on our own experience (ref C), Obasanjo is becoming steadily less willing to listen to dissenting points of view. Indeed, he feeds the sycophancy Anenih and others engendered, producing in his own mind a much rosier image of his performance and popularity than is shared by many influential fellow citizens. According to Esajere, Obasanjo is also "trying to show the skeptical external world that it is not him that wants to be president; it is Nigerians who want him, who have anointed him as Messiah."

WHERE ARE THE ALTERNATIVES?

15. (C) Many Nigerians despair that the country is on the road to a de facto single-party system. Obasanjo's public comment that he shared some of the concerns of Zimbabwe's Mugabe is read in light of Nigerian domestic politics rather than the issues affecting Zimbabwe today. Leaders of the unregistered parties believe that State House is intent upon keeping them out of the 2003 contest. Alh. Saleh Jambo, pro-tem Chairman of the United Nigeria Democratic Party (UNDP) told us recently that he found Obasanjo's expressed sympathy for the Zimbabwean leader a matter of great concern. The deepening conflict over the local government polls, notably their timing, the status of voter registers and the role of the unregistered parties, further muddies electoral waters.

16. (C) The APP and the AD joined forces to put up a joint candidate (Olu Falae) in the 1999 Presidential elections. The two parties did well in gubernatorial elections in the North (APP) and the Southwest (AD). But both parties are beset by factionalism (Ref B), and at-risk governors (particularly from the APP) are lining up with Obasanjo while remaining formally within their parties. Adamu Aliero of

Kebbi is said to have explained that, just as one is instructed to fasten one's own oxygen mask before that of a child, so, too, the governor must save himself if he is to obtain benefits for his people. Such unabashed opportunism pervades the political class and is both curse and blessing. It militates against the establishment of interest-based politics (a basic element of viable democracy), but it also discourages politicians from standing on principle when the wind is clearly blowing in another direction (thereby reducing the chances of an enduring political crisis).

117. (C) Notwithstanding Anenih's infamous "no vacancy" line, there is no shortage of people who would like to move into Aso Villa. By all accounts, Babangida is particularly intent upon salvaging his tattered reputation by winning the presidency, if not in 2003 then certainly four years later. However, he (and all other contenders) must assess their prospects. The fact that Obasanjo has remarkably little to offer the average Nigerian as proof of his leadership and stewardship over the past three years does not nullify his hopes for a second term. He simply needs to pre-empt likely antagonists.

118. (C) Here lies the genius of organized sycophancy; it constitutes a political show of force. The point is not to convince a "skeptical external world" that Nigerians want OO for another four years. Anenih is far too calculating and experienced to think foreigners unable to see through such a contrivance. Calling on the troops to endorse the leader for another term is typical in any democracy; the extent to which they comply is a good test of the leader's popularity. What is different about Nigeria today (and unsettlingly similar to Nigeria in 1998) is the leader's seeming need to say he is being "called" (by God and/or the people). Whether this flows from a need to gratify the ego, or is a cynical view of the electorate's sophistication is anyone's guess. Either way, inveigling or coercing opposition politicians to join the calls for four more years adds to the punch, leaving potential opposing candidates off-balance and uncertain about the likely costs of contesting.

IN THE FINAL ANALYSIS...

119. (C) ...Obasanjo will decide whether or not to seek a second term. All outward signs continue to point to "yes," but the outward signs are largely of his boosters' making. His own pronouncements suggest a strong inclination to run again, but there remains a small chance he might say, "no." Despite his frequent travels abroad, too much time spent in Abuja while in Nigeria and an increasing tendency to brush aside advice running contrary to his own views, Obasanjo is too intelligent not to realize how little his Administration has accomplished for the average Nigerian -- and how quickly the sychophants can find new heroes. The fast ends tomorrow.
Andrews